

PRESENTATION AND UNVEILING

OF THE

Tablet Commemorating the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, May 20th, 1775, and the Twenty-Seven Signers

Erected by the North Carolina Society of
the Colonial Dames of America

THE CAPITOL, RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

Monday, May 20th, 1912, 1:00 o'Clock P. M.



PROGRAMME OF EXERCISES

" Carolina " - - - - Third Regiment Band, N. C. N. G.

Prayer - - - - Rev. Wm. McC. White, D. D.
Pastor of Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, N. C.

Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence

Read by

Dr. D. HARVEY HILL

President N. C. A. and M. College

Presentation of Tablet to the State of North Carolina

Hon. WALTER CLARK

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina

Acceptance of Tablet for the State of North Carolina

His Excellency, WILLIAM W. KITCHIN

Governor of North Carolina

" America " - - - - The Third Regiment Band, N. C. N. G.

Adjourn to Rotunda

Unveiling of Tablet by Thirteen Members of the

North Carolina Society of Colonial Dames of America

" The Star Spangled Banner " - - The Raleigh High School Chorus

Benediction - - - - Rev. Wm. McC. White, D. D.

" Columbia " - - - - The Third Regiment Band, N. C. N. G.

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IN COMMEMORATION OF THE FAMOUS 20th OF MAY, 1775

Address Delivered on May 20th, 1912, in the State
Capitol, at Raleigh, at the Presentation of the
Mecklenburg Declaration Tablet

By Hon. WALTER CLARK
Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina

Governor Kitchin, Ladies and Fellow Citizens:—

During the long reign of Queen Victoria of England there was so uniformly fine weather when she attended a public function that it became proverbially known as "Queen's weather." Of course today, when we have so many queens in attendance on this historic occasion, we have a perfect day.

We all feel the deepest grief at the absence today of one who ever felt the greatest interest in everything that reflected honor and credit upon North Carolina and its history—a loyal and true son of the State and one of its most distinguished citizens.* Peace to his ashes and honor always to his memory.

To understand the boldness, the audacity, the intensity of conviction of the men who made the Mecklenburg Declaration, we must consider the surrounding circumstances as they appeared to those men and not as we see them today after the successful result of the movement that they initiated and after the splendid achievements of 137 years. The declaration they made was till then unknown in the annals of history. It was treason not only

* Hon. R. H. Battle, who had died this morning.

to the government, but to the frame-work of society. It was the initiative by the people themselves of a government of the people and for the people.

At the time of the Mecklenburg Declaration in all the bounds of the thirteen colonies there was not a single man of any prominence who had declared himself for independence. Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hancock and others who became great leaders were at that time busy in proclaiming that they did not favor independence, that Britain had no more loyal sons than they and that they were seeking only the redress of grievances at the hands of the government. We have Washington's own words, a month later, when he took command of the army at Cambridge, that he "abhorred the idea of independence," and on August 25, 1775, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to the same effect which has been published in his works.

Great Britain was at that time the wealthiest and probably the most powerful nation in the world. A quarter of a century later, almost alone and unaided, she defied the colossal military genius of the ages, and for two decades opposed the power of France, until she finally laid it in the dust. Against that country from which they had received their origin and their government, a handful of men in a remote village, contrary to the advice and teachings of the great leaders of the colonies, defiantly held their meeting and proclaimed to all the world that the Americans were and of a right ought to be free and independent people. The great leaders of the time were for revolt against oppression and a redress of grievances. The men of Mecklenburg were for revolution, a complete severing of the ties that bound us to the mother country and an absolute break with the traditions of government.

The Mecklenburg Declaration is another proof that all movements for the betterment of the masses and for the maintenance of the rights of the people, and all revolutions to assert them, have come from the people themselves and never originate with their leaders, however able and patriotic.

The people of Mecklenburg were an educated people, God-fearing and self-reliant. They belonged to that great Scotch-Irish race which has given to this country so many of its Presidents, so many orators, so many leaders in thought and action. But the best gift that they have ever bestowed upon the world is their steady maintenance of the principle that the masses have a right to think, to decide, and to act for themselves. These great movements have always come from the ranks of the people. It was at no suggestion of leaders, upon no resolution of constituted authority, but upon their own initiative and acting upon their own instinctive manhood and sense of right that the unorganized people, the embattled farmers at Lexington "fired the shot that was heard around the world" and drove in headlong flight the veteran battalions of Britain back to Boston. It was on the meadows of Rutli that the Swiss peasants defied the hitherto overwhelming power of Austria and inaugurated the republic, which, though surrounded by monarchies, has survived to this day.

There have been very few, if any, historical events about which there has not been controversy, from that far-off primal day when the first lady of the land was turned out of all her possessions, down to the discussed and disputed occurrences in the late cabinet of our only living ex-President. Even the Mecklenburg Declaration has not been spared, but now that its friends have the ladies on their side, they feel that they have the last word. At any rate, they know now that they are right. No one denies that there was a declaration in Charlotte in May, 1775. It has been contended that this was made on May 31 instead of May 20. The difference of eleven days is an entirely immaterial circumstance in itself. It has been further contended that the resolutions passed May 31 were the only ones and that those accredited on May 20 were not enacted at all.

The declaration of May 20 dissolved the political bands which connected us with the mother country and absolved from all allegiance to the British crown. And it

was further resolved "We do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, are and of a right ought to be sovereign and self-governing." The resolves of May 31 whose authenticity no one questions provided among other things that "The Provincial Congress of each province, under the direction of the great Continental Congress, is invested with all legislative and executive power within their respective provinces, and that no other legislative or executive power does or can exist at this time in any of these colonies." It was further resolved that all commissions, civil and military, heretofore granted by the crown, were null and void and that all former laws were now suspended. The meeting then proceeded to pass resolutions to create a court to provide for taxation and appointed officers to administer the government of the country till laws could be passed. These resolutions on their face indicate that there had been a previous declaration absorbing from allegiance.

The evidence is plenary that resolutions were adopted at a meeting presided over by Abram Alexander, and when J. McKnitt Alexander was secretary. The resolutions of May 31 were signed by Ephraim Brevard, "Clerk of the Committee." It is clear, therefore, that there were two meetings and the just inference is that the latter resolutions were adopted by a committee which at the meeting on May 20 had been appointed to formulate regulations and provide for officials—action which had been rendered necessary by the dissolution of all connection with the mother country and absolution from all allegiance which had been declared at such former meeting.

The difference in the dates is of no importance and either set of resolutions was a Declaration of Independence. The only practical importance of the controversy is the implication that the authorities of the State of North Carolina and the people of Mecklenburg themselves were incompetent or careless in the investigation of the truth and recklessly palmed off a falsehood upon the world.

Unfortunately, the declaration of May 20 was destroyed when the house of J. McKnitt Alexander, secretary of

that meeting, was burned in 1800. A copy which had been sent to England in 1775 was taken out of the files of the British Archives by Mr. Stephenson, of Virginia, our minister to England in 1837, and was lost. The copy sent to General Davie by Mr. Alexander after his house was burned was admittedly written from memory. There was simply a fortuitous combination of circumstances. The adherents of May 31 take advantage of this to deny the authenticity of the copy of the declaration of May 20 furnished to Judge Martin prior to the fire which is published by him in his history, and to demand further proof of an act which after the long lapse of time cannot be furnished. They ignore the fact the verdict made up by the people of Mecklenburg nearly a century ago, when survivors of the great scene were still among them, and that the judgment rendered upon the verdict after due investigation by the the people of the State, are evidence. The burden is upon those who would impeach the bona fides and correctness of that judgment to furnish evidence that there was no declaration on May 20. We must concede something to the intelligence and integrity of former generations. Those virtues did not originate in our day.

I would not fatigue this audience with restating the evidence in favor of the declaration of May 20. No new fact or argument could now be produced as to a matter which has been so thoroughly investigated and so fully discussed. It was called to the attention of the public in 1819, and after thorough investigation the Legislature of 1830-31, which contained many men of eminence, adopted a resolution which fully sustained the authenticity of May 20. From that day to this, almost without a break, that date has been celebrated on each recurring anniversary by the people of Charlotte, than whom there are none more intelligent. In 1861 the State honored the 20th of May as the date of our first Declaration of Independence, by calling together the convention which on that day declared our independence of the Federal Government, and the convention also placed that date upon our State flag where it has remained to

this day. The State has also made May 20 a legal holiday and placed the date upon our State Seal.

So far as the deliberate investigation and the Official action of the State through the representatives of the people for nearly one hundred years can settle the matter, the verdict has been rendered and final judgment has been rendered.

The first investigation was had when many survivors of the event were still living who could speak as eye-witnesses as to what transpired and as to the correctness of the date. As late as the Celebration of 1826, some seventy of the Revolution were present and took part in the celebration. In 1831, and even later, there were still some of these survivors who took part in these celebrations. No celebration of May 31 has ever been attempted.

At the centennial of the Mecklenburg Declaration of May 20, 1875, in the presence of a vast crowd gathered from many States, an honored son of North Carolina,* who had represented this State both in the United States and Confederate States Senate, and who had served two terms as its chief executive, summed up the evidence in a dispassionate analysis which has left nothing which could be added. He was an able lawyer, accustomed to weigh evidence, of the soundest judgment, and conscientious in all his dealings. Had he found the slightest reasons to doubt his conclusions he would have unhesitatingly have stated it. Judge Gaston, Dr. F. L. Hawks and many others of our ablest men have also spoken and written their concurrence in the authenticity of the date and declaration of May 20.

We know that in January, 1775, the Committees of Safety, in parts of, if not throughout the State, agreed to hold monthly meetings on the twentieth of each month during that year, and though the records have been largely destroyed, enough remains to show that these meetings were so held. On that very May 20, 1775, on the day the meeting at Charlotte was being held, we know that these

* Hon. W. A. Graham.

committees held their meetings in Pitt, New Hanover and in other counties, and that on June 20, 1775, the "Liberty Point Declaration" in Cumberland was adopted and that other counties had their meetings on the same day.

The origin of the opposition to the 20th of May is based upon the letters of Mr. Jefferson and of John Adams written in 1819—forty-four years after the event—stating they did not remember ever to have heard of it. This would equally call in question the resolves of May 31. The testimony of survivors is explicit that copies of the declaration of May 20 were sent to our delegates to Congress in Philadelphia, and we have the affidavit of the messenger, Captain Jack, that he carried and delivered these copies. Congress at that time was denying any desire for independence, and these resolutions of Mecklenburg were probably not made public. And if they had been, county resolutions from North Carolina would have made no abiding impression upon Mr. Jefferson or Mr. Adams. Writing in this same year, 1819, in regard to a controversy as to the date of the signing of the Philadelphia Declaration, Mr. Jefferson positively affirmed that it was "signed by all the members present except Mr. Dickerson on July 4."* Whereas we now know from the secret journal of the Congress that no member whatever signed it till August 2, and we know from letters of members written at the time that others signed it at various dates along during the fall and Mr. McKean several months later. Some signed it who were not even members on July 4, and some who were members at that date did not sign it at all.† Mr. Jefferson lived a life crowded with memories, but if his memory was thus deceptive as to the incidents connected with the greatest event in his whole life, it is not astonishing that in this same year, 1819, when he was in his seventy-seventh year, and Mr. Adams was in his eighty-fourth, that they retained no recollection of resolutions passed by a county down in North Carolina. Mr Jefferson stated in his letter that he

* Hazelton's History of Declaration of Independence, 195.

† Do., 204.

would not say that the declaration of May 20 was a fabrication, while Mr. Adams in his letter of that year and also one written in 1813, said that after long hanging in the balance while the declaration at Philadelphia was finally unanimous, that it was carried by one majority which was the vote of Mr. Hewes, of North Carolina, who "became convinced by the perusal of letters and **public proceedings** that the majority in that province favored independence."*

We must remember that when this matter was fully investigated in 1819 that the date of the declaration was 1775, was no farther off than 1868 is from us now, as to which many living people can give conclusive testimony. We know that two of the most prominent men,† who boldly and effectively led the minority in this hall in 1868 and others, are still alive and their statement of the proceedings here would command respect as did that of the Mecklenburg survivors in 1819.

Without going into details, the authenticity of the declaration of May 20 rests upon positive evidence; the testimony of survivors, the copy of Judge Martin made before the fire, and the Davie copy made afterwards from memory, and upon the investigation and conclusion reached by the intelligent people of Mecklenburg and upon the decision to the same effect made by the authorities of this State and the respectful observance of the day by both for nearly a century. The case against it is based upon the inability to produce the original which is not unnatural as it was destroyed by fire, upon the fact that Mr. Jefferson did not remember it and upon the fact that there were resolves passed on May 31.

The latter were proper sequels to a more definite declaration on May 20. Certainly it is not reasonable to infer therefrom a total denial of all the direct evidence as to May 20 which was found satisfactory by the people of Mecklenburg and of this State, and which both have

* Hazelton's History of Declaration of Independence, 210.
Do., 23, 119.

† Thomas J. Jarvis and John W. Graham.

acted on for nearly a century. *The evidence in its favor is positive. That against it is merely argument and inference.*

The action taken at Mecklenburg on May 20 was in accordance with the general forward tone of public sentiment in North Carolina, for it was by this State that the first resolution to instruct the delegates at Philadelphia in favor of National independence was passed on April 12, 1776, a date which we have also placed upon our State flag, but which is also ignored by Mr. Jefferson. The first victory for the patriot cause was won by North Carolinians at Moore's Creek on February 27, 1776. Moreover, it was in this State ten years previous, in 1765, at Wilmington, that the only opposition to the enforcement of the Stamp Act was made by men with arms in their hands.

A distinguished mathematician was induced to read "Paradise Lost." When asked his opinion, he replied: "It is very fine but what does it prove?" If the advocates of May 31 could prove their case the result would simply be to find that there was a declaration of independence made eleven days later in Charlotte, not in exactly the same words, but fully as definite as that of May 20. What would be the benefit achieved?

To raise doubts as to matters of history which the world has deemed well settled is a favorite diversion with some. It requires merely a little leisure and ingenuity and it confers a gentle glow of satisfaction to be better informed than other people. Archbishop Whately some years ago wrote a most interesting pamphlet entitled "Historic Doubts About Napoleon Bonaparte," in which he demonstrated, by the use of the reasoning usually adopted by those questioning historical facts, that the emperor Napoleon had never existed and that what was reported about him was legendary and mythical. By the same process the Mecklenburg Declaration or any other historical fact whatever can be called in question whenever by the lapse of time additional evidence cannot be had.

On no point has these historical doubts been more frequently raised than as to the correctness of dates. Scien-

tific men have sought to prove that Christmas was not the anniversary of the birth of our Savior, but that he was born in August when the shepherds were "keeping their watch over their flocks by night" and they further demonstrated that this momentous event occurred seven years before the beginning of our present era, and hence that in truth this is the year 1919 instead of the year 1912. This reasoning has been adopted by many eminent divines as correct, but if true it in no wise shakes the foundation of our faith.

There are those who say and truly, that the American Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 2*, and hence that day should be celebrated instead of July 4. They also say with truth that the declaration instead of being signed on July 4 was not signed altogether on that nor any other day, but that from time to time for some weeks the members of the Congress were appending their signatures to that immortal document.† Had that instrument been destroyed by fire we would have had a similar controversy as to its date and language.

However these immaterial matters may be, the time will never come when the Christian people of any land will celebrate Christmas in August nor change the dates of all past occurrences. And as long as the fourth of July returns when ever the sun shall throw his roseate gleams on the storm-bound coast of Maine the cannon shall reverberate, and to paraphrase the language of Mr. Webster, "keeping pace with the flying hours as they speed," along the great lakes of the north, through the valleys of the mighty river, across the great mountains, martial music and the roar of a cannon shall keep fresh the day in the remembrance of a free people. And so long as this State shall revere the actions of our forefathers and have confidence in their integrity and their intelligence, the date which this State has placed on its flag, and on its great seal, and which it has set apart as a State holiday, shall be observed by our people.

* Hazelton's History of Declaration of Independence, 166.

† Do., 210.

It is to the ladies of North Carolina, and especially to the Society of the Colonial Dames, that we owe this bronze tablet which is to stand imbedded in the granite walls of this Capitol in perpetual memorial of the great deed of the men of Charlotte and Mecklenburg on the day 137 years ago. Some one has said that if doubt and skepticism should corrupt the race of men and belief in God, and immortality should seem to perish from the earth, it would abide in the hearts of pure-minded women who would raise up at their knees the children whose faith in another generation should revive, remake and redeem humanity. Should this Nation seem ready to perish by luxury and corruption, should we lose faith in the valor and patriotism of our men, it is in the pure hearts of our women that patriotic remembrances of an earlier and purer age will be perpetuated and at their knees be brought up a race of men who shall redeem and save the Republic.

It is to our glorious women that we owe the monuments all over the State, which recall and honor the sacrifice of themselves by the men of 1861-65, and it is to them that we owe these tablets that recall the patriotic deeds of the great Revolution when these colonies won in the greatest movement of people in all the ages.

Your Excellency, on behalf of the Colonial Dames of North Carolina, and at their request, I now have the honor to present to the State of North Carolina, through you as its chief executive, this tablet in imperishable bronze, which shall recall to all future times the great deed which was accomplished at Charlotte, in Mecklenburg County, on May 20, 1775.

GOVERNOR KITCHIN'S SPEECH

"I have heard with great interest of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, as told by your distinguished Chief Justice, and it gives me great pleasure to accept this tablet given by the Colonial Dames of North Carolina.

"It has been a habit of civilized people from the time of Moses to this good hour to establish monuments to things along the pathway of humanity, and as we recall things occurring as we emerge from savages, a few things stand out like mountain peaks. This has been especially so during the last several centuries.

"There have been three events of surpassing importance. Columbus discovered America and almost doubled the world; Luther did not discover the reformation but found the spirit slumbering among the people and our own Revolution was the result of a popular uprising against organized injustice. Always there has been some man in the crowd to make the bold strike and down among the people was the great determination to be free."

The Governor spoke of the hypocrites, time-servers and non-combatants who delayed the coming of freedom and touching the controversy as to the day, said: "I am never interested in these controversies. My heart is more filled with patriotism than with historical fact. I am more interested in patriotism than in historians." I feel somewhat like Berry Davidson, who, when asked to prove some assertion made against an opponent, said: "I don't have to prove it. I said it is so myself." And that is the way with the Mecklenburg Declaration. It is so because they said so themselves. They believe it and keep on saying it.

"The kings and nobility have been compelled to yield to the people.

"I have come to congratulate you upon the patriotic work of the Colonial Dames, what they have done and are doing. I did not come to make a speech. You have heard a most eloquent one. I accept this tablet on behalf of a great State, and not personally because I have no right to do that, much as it is a personal pleasure and privilege. The great majority of our people will revere the Mecklenburg Declaration not only for the event itself but for the Twentieth of May on which it was written."